

# IMPROVING THE TEACHING OF THE PRAGMATIC NORMS OF CONVERSATION: A JOURNEY OF REFLECTIVE TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH.

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## Abstract

*Following the recent renewal of interest in the teaching of pragmatics (Kasper & Roever, 2004), the author has conducted a series of action research investigations into the teaching of pragmatic norms using elicited recorded samples of native speaker role-play (Denny, 2008). This article reflects on the journey and reports in detail on the final cycle of this action research journey in which the teaching of the pragmatics of casual conversation to two classes using such samples was investigated. The results indicate that there are noticeable levels of improvement in the ability of participants to use these norms and they see this improvement as having arisen from exposure not only to these semi-authentic recordings in the classroom but also to contact with native speakers outside the classroom together with explicit input from the teacher.*

There has recently been renewed interest in the teaching of the socio-cultural norms of second languages. The importance of these norms has been widely accepted (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007; Yates, 2008) and there is some evidence that they are not learned by immersion (Kasper & Roever, 2004). There is also evidence that the more advanced a person's command of the target language, the less socio-cultural or pragmatic mistakes are likely to be tolerated by native speakers (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). Pragmatics is defined by Lo Castro (2003) as 'the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and non-linguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organised activities' (p.15) and includes sociopragmatics, or the cultural understanding implicit in the exchange, and pragmalinguistics, or the way these understandings are realised in language. It has been shown that pragmatic norms are teachable and probably best learned by explicit instruction (Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Kasper & Roever, 2004), although there is still some debate around whether this applies for all features and conditions (Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Takahashi, 2005; Takimoto, 2006, 2007).

Descriptions of some of the norms of casual conversation relevant to this article in recent literature include those of small talk (Holmes, 1999, 2005), topic changes in conversation (West & Garcia, 1988) and conversation endings (Grant & Starks, 2001; Schlegloff & Sacks, 1973). A more detailed analysis of the discourse of casual conversation is found in Eggins & Slade (1997).

In the teaching of the linguistic and socio-cultural norms of oral interaction to EAL (English as an Additional Language) learners, the use of authentic or semi-authentic models has been widely advocated (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Butterworth, 2000; Carter, Hughes, & McCarthy, 1998; Yates, 2004, 2008). The limitations of many traditional textbook sample dialogues for teaching natural language have also been noted (Gilmore, 2004; Hughes, 2002). A number of studies and articles and books have outlined, discussed and evaluated methodologies for teaching these norms to language learners, including the use of naturalistic models (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Basturkmen, 2002, 2007; Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Yates, 2008). These include having students listen to the model texts and do guided consciousness-raising tasks, scaffolded practice of the 'noticed' language, and role-played practice of complete conversations inside the classroom. Other activities

include trying the newly-learned language outside the classroom, cross-cultural discussion, and comparison of the norms of the first and target culture.

There has also been research and discussion on using fully authentic sample texts to teach the socio-cultural norms of the workplace (Malthus, Holmes, and Major, 2005; Riddiford, 2007) and the norms of academic contexts (Basturkmen, 2001, 2002, 2007) to more proficient learners. However there is less ready availability of suitable fully authentic texts for learners with other needs and foci. To search corpora or collect fully authentic texts and adapt them for classroom use involves time and expertise that classroom teachers may not have. Instead, elicited data from native speakers rather than fully authentic data can be used. These have some features similar to naturally-occurring data (Golato, 2003) and more responsive to the needs and focus of classroom teaching (Yates, 2008). Another solution, more suitable for classes with a community focus, has been the creation of naturalistic texts using actors and scripts based on an authentic role-played native speaker interaction (Brawn, 2002; Butterworth, 2000; Delaruelle, 2001). Yates, (2008) and Skyrme (1990-1991) have also used this approach in the preparation of classroom materials, using non-professional actors to get more natural delivery.

A challenge in teaching pragmatics is to avoid giving learners the impression that they have to adopt the norms of the target culture, rather than simply becoming aware of them and being empowered to make choices. Making comparisons between the first and target cultures and ensuring that learners are aware that they have a choice is therefore important (Yates, 2004).

## **An action research journey**

In the teaching of adult migrants and refugees I have used action research to improve my practice in the teaching of spoken language. In response to the literature I used authentic and semi-authentic texts first to teach the language features, then the pragmatics of casual conversation between friends and colleagues and finally negotiation (for example between a landlord and tenant over return of the bond) in New Zealand English. With little time to collect fully authentic samples, I created my own elicited samples, recording native speakers role-playing unrehearsed in a situation familiar to them. I drew partly from the approach of Butterworth (2001) but used non-professional actors as in Yates (2008). An informal analysis of the language of the resulting samples has showed that they contain many of the features of native-speaker oral interaction often omitted in traditional textbook dialogues. These include overlap, backchannelling and evaluative comments while listening (*Mm, that's great*) incomplete sentences, informal language, formulaic language, extended closing sequences and small talk - warm-up talk used at the beginning of many exchanges (Eggins & Slade, 1997; Thornbury & Slade, 2006). I first used these samples to teach spoken language features, and later to teach pragmatic norms.

In order to evaluate this approach, I then carried out a series of action research projects, the most recent in 2007 and 2008. In 2007 I found that there was considerable improvement, measured by pre- and post-tests, in intermediate learners' ability to use socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic norms in four areas of negotiation - getting attention, introducing the topic, using appropriate language to negotiate, and finishing the conversation (Denny, 2008). The instruction involved having learners listen to semi-authentic samples, analyse the transcripts, do various awareness-raising activities based on the texts, then scaffolded, and finally independent production. I then taught the pragmatics of casual conversation using a similar approach and carried out two cycles of action research with two classes at a similar level in semester 1 and semester 2, 2008.

This article focuses on some of the findings of the latter investigation, in particular the effects of using elicited spoken texts to teach the socio-pragmatics and pragmalinguistics of three aspects of casual conversation between friends which were problematic for learners: small talk, changing the subject and finishing the conversation.

## **Investigation into the teaching the pragmatics of casual conversation between equals in NZ English**

### ***Participants in the study***

There were eight out of 20 consenting students in semester 1, and 15 out of 24 in semester 2. The following table gives a participant profile:

#### **Participant profile: consenting students semester 1 (N=8) and semester 2 2008 (N=15)**

<b>Number of students</b>	23 students
<b>Countries of origin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ China - 11</li> <li>▪ Iran - 2</li> <li>▪ Korea - 2</li> <li>▪ Taiwan - 2</li> <li>▪ Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia &amp; Somalia - 1 each</li> </ul>
<b>Educational background</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tertiary level degrees - 6</li> <li>▪ Tertiary qualifications below degree level - 7</li> <li>▪ High school qualifications - 9</li> <li>▪ No high school qualifications - 1</li> </ul>
<b>Goals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Study or goal where tertiary study required - 17</li> <li>▪ Paid or community work - 6</li> </ul>
<b>Length of time in New Zealand</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Less than 2 years - 5</li> <li>▪ More than two years - 18</li> </ul>

Time in NZ ranged from just one year to 17. Students were admitted to the class mainly on their writing proficiency levels (approximately equivalent to 4 General IELTS). Oral/aural proficiency levels were not formally tested on entry but the range was approximately equivalent to 3.5 to 6 on the General IELTS scale, with most students round 4. The aspirations of the majority (to work in professional or semi-professional contexts) appeared to be to join the educated middle-class in New Zealand. Consequently the samples chosen for instruction involved middle class participants and the norms were those of middle-class Pakeha New Zealand English. Maori norms, where they differed, were discussed. Studies have shown that a knowledge of the norms of conversation are important for success in professional and semi-professional employment (Holmes, 1999) and in the context of undergraduate study (Couper, 2002).

Both cohorts did the same 15 week community focused course in English for speakers of other languages. A comparison of data from the reflective journals in semester 1 and semester 2 indicates the same basic methodology and activities were used in both semesters.

### ***Teaching strategy***

The topic was taught over seven weeks with two to three hours of tuition a week. I used as models one semi-scripted text from an Australian text-book (Delaruelle, 2001) and four semi-authentic samples I made from elicited unrehearsed and unedited native-speaker role-play.

The teaching activities I used to exploit the semi-authentic texts included:

- a. Group and whole class (teacher-led) discussion of the cultural context of conversations they were about to hear.
- b. Listening to tapes of role-played conversations between native speakers on a variety of topics (see Appendix 1).
- c. Answering written comprehension and consciousness-raising linguistic and pragmatic questions about the conversations they had heard, individually and in groups, with teacher guidance (see Appendix 1).
- d. Student-to-student role-played practice with some feedback from the teacher.
- e. Group and whole-class (teacher-led) discussion involving cross-cultural comparisons between pragmatic features noticed in the target language and those of the first language. During these discussions and later practice sessions the learners were reminded that they did not have to adopt the norms of the target culture in their everyday life, but were merely to show awareness of them in the assessment.
- f. Teacher input about the pragmatics of the target language, based on an analysis of the samples.
- g. More controlled teacher-led oral activities and written worksheets designed to raise student consciousness and practise the target language pragmatic features.

### ***Research questions***

There were four research questions in all. Due to space constraints I will focus on two of these:

1. Was there any change after tuition in the level of student use of New Zealand English socio-cultural norms in a role-played task?
2. Which activities did the participants think 'helped' and 'most helped' them towards any positive changes in their pragmatic skills?

### ***Research procedures***

In the investigation the following data was used:

1. Teacher administered pre- and post-tests consisting of a role-played conversation with a classmate. The pre-test was administered before any specific teaching had taken place on

conversation. The post-test was administered at the end of the teaching unit on conversation as part of the course assessment. Both were recorded and assessed later on formal criteria (see Appendix 2). The pre- and post-tests consisted of role-play with a partner in which the students were required to start a conversation with a classmate well known to them, keep the conversation going for six minutes (exchanging information and/or opinions on two of a list of five topics: travel/sightseeing, smoking, drugs, or food and restaurants), then finish the conversation.

2. Student pre- and post-tuition written self-assessments of the same skills using similar criteria. These consisted of questions asking students to rate their ability in each of the skills on a three point scale (Yes, Sometimes, No). They were administered after completion of the tuition and after the post-test, but before students had had results or feedback from the post-tests (see Appendix 3).
3. A survey in which they identified all activities which they believed had contributed to improvement in their pragmatic skills, and selected two which had 'most helped' them (see Appendix 4).
4. A journal in which the teacher (who was also the researcher) recorded daily teaching activities and reflections on the progress of the teaching and learning.

The investigation focused on the three skills which the pre-tests showed were most problematic. These were making small talk, changing the subject and finishing the conversation.

The pre- and post-tests and self-assessments were collated and the results compared to ascertain the number of students achieving in each skill at the exit standard for the certificate level of the course pre- and post-tuition. The standard was assessed by reference to a descriptor written for the programme based on ASLPR - the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings, (Wylie & Ingram, 1995) - and lies between Basic Social Proficiency and Basic Vocational Proficiency.

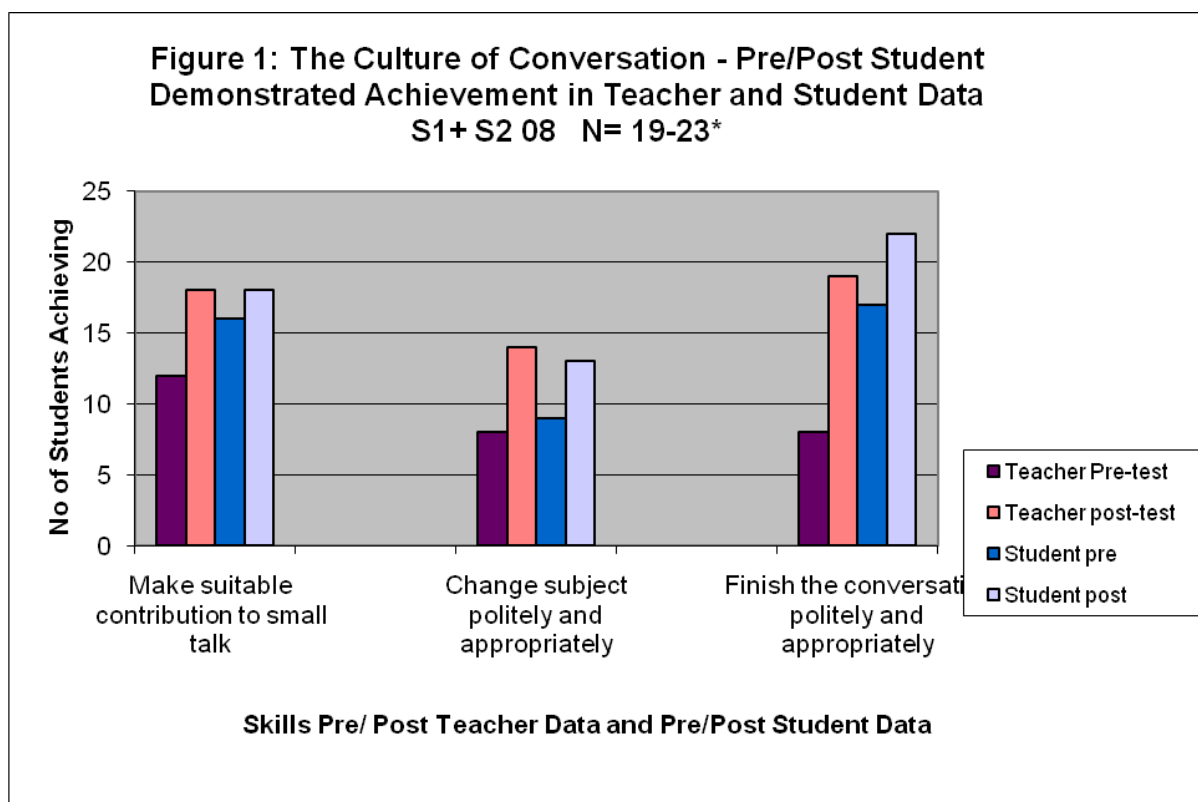
The post-tuition survey was collated to see which activities had been most effective from the student perspective.

The reflective journal was analysed by theme and used to provide context and thick analysis and as a record of the classroom activities.

## **Results**

### ***Achievement Post-tuition***

The data for the number of students achieving at the exit standard in each of the skills causing initial difficulty is shown in Figure 1.



\* Note that in 'change subject' four students did not get an opportunity in the interaction to demonstrate these skills, so were removed from the data in this area. So for 'change subject' N=19.

In all three skills in the teacher assessments, 77% or more of participants achieved at the exit level post-tuition (up from between 33% and 53% in the pre-test) and the highest proportion (83%) was in finishing appropriately (up from 33%). Finishing is, of the three areas, the most formulaic and therefore easiest to achieve once the staging norms, ie preclose and close (Grant & Starks, 2001; Schlegloff & Sacks, 1973), are known. It is also most salient because of its position in conversation, and therefore possibly easier to 'notice', a precondition for acquisition (Swain, 2004). Small talk involves knowing which topics are appropriate according to native speaker norms (Holmes, 2005) and knowing the way questions are usually framed by native speakers. Changing the subject involved taking a turn appropriately, appropriately rounding off the last topic by giving short and suitable feedback, using an appropriately discourse marker if there is a substantial change and asking a suitable opening question (West & Garcia, 1988). These kinds of more subtle and complex rules are possibly less salient to learners, and this could be the reason for the lower numbers achieving in 'changing the subject'. Also more online processing (ie listening and composing at the same time) is needed to achieve an appropriate transition (House, 1996).

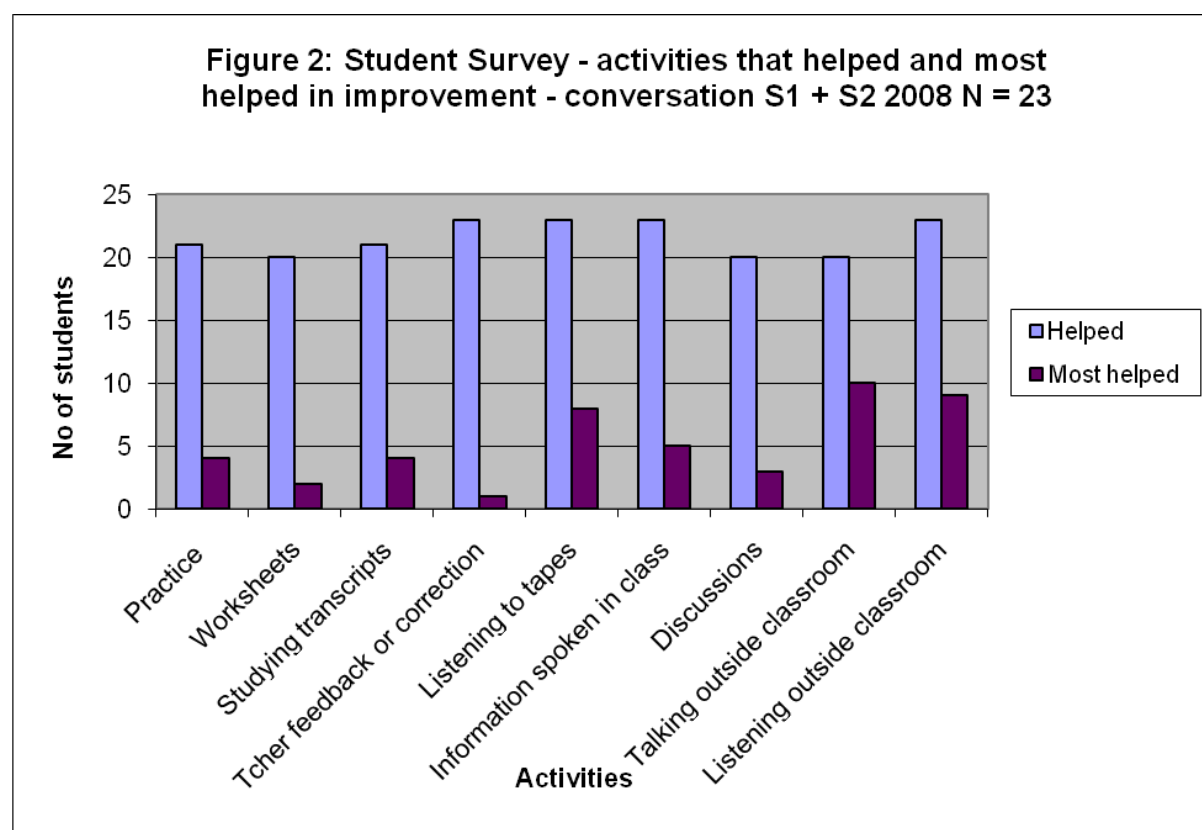
Post-tuition, the data for student and teacher assessments are similar, with students slightly more confident of their ability to finish the conversation appropriately. The teacher may have been applying stricter criteria than the students, but this is a matter of speculation, and follow-up interviews would have been helpful but were not possible because the self assessments were anonymous.

The teacher data was complicated by the interactive strategy of the more dominant partners of four participants. These learners did not have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills in 'changing the subject' in the assessment. It is difficult to find a way to overcome this difficulty within the role-play

format without sacrificing its advantages. Using discourse completion tasks (tasks in which participants are given a scenario and asked to write what they would say in this situation) in addition to the role-play could be a possible strategy which has been adopted by Riddiford & Joe (2010). With higher level learners a reflective journal (which measures awareness but not performance) may more clearly show changes in awareness.

### ***Student perceptions of the role of learning activities in improvement***

To gauge which activities might have had an effect on the improvement in competence, the data from the student survey was examined (see Figure 2). In this survey participants were asked to identify all activities they believed had helped in improvement. They were also asked to identify only two they believed had ‘most helped’ them (see Appendix 4).



All students indicated that they believed that they had improved overall and that classroom information, feedback or correction from the teacher, and listening to conversation tapes in class as well as out of class listening had helped. The response also indicated that the other five activities helped at least 87% of students.

When asked which two had ‘most helped’, listening in and out of the classroom and speaking outside the classroom, together with ‘information spoken by the teacher’ were selected by a greater number of students than other activities. Exposure to native speakers outside the classroom was, then, for a number of these students, an advantage in the learning of pragmatic norms and the experience was a valuable supplement to the classroom. However participants still believed they needed the classroom for close listening and information from the teacher.

## Discussion

Overall there was a moderate improvement in students' ability to use the appropriate pragmatic norms in making a suitable contribution to small talk and changing the subject, and a more substantial improvement in finishing the conversation. Making a suitable contribution to small talk and changing the subject proved more problematical for students to master than finishing, possibly because the norms and language for these activities are less salient in the input data, and are also complex and hard to access while coping with the linguistic demands of face-to-face online production (House, 1996). It is interesting that more students indicated that they found the listening input both inside and outside the classroom and explicit instruction, rather than other activities such as practice, 'most helped' in promoting acquisition. Their experience endorses McCarthy's emphasis on richness of authentic input and his claim that output activity does not have as much value initially (McCarthy, 1998). In addition the data suggests that explicit instruction was beneficial in promoting the learning of pragmatic norms, consistent with the literature reported in Kasper and Roever (2004).

It would be helpful to know the quantity and quality of the outside input that these students had, and the relationship between their ability to 'notice' outside the classroom and the classroom input. The data collected does not shed any light on this. I attempted to gather further data from those who had chosen 'listening outside the class' as 'most helped' by issuing a follow-up short written questionnaire, but the responses were not sufficiently explicit and the questions were not uniform enough between the semester 1 cohort and the semester 2 cohort to yield useful and reliable answers to this question. It would be beneficial in a future study to do more carefully designed follow-up interviews with these students, probing for specific information.

These results apply only to this small sample and are not generalisable. Also the number of participants was insufficient to conduct a statistical analysis. There is possible researcher bias as the researcher was also the teacher, mitigated in part by anonymising student surveys and self-assessments and having a selection of teacher pre- and post-tests moderated by colleagues. My confidence in the outcome, however, is reinforced by the fact that a similarly designed action research project with students at the same proficiency level involving the teaching of the pragmatics of negotiation for agreement with a gate-keeper carried out in semester 1, 2007 (Denny, 2008) also yielded positive results.

Data from research conducted at different levels with students with a variety of goals and foci – employment and academic as well as community – would yield further useful information. The use of follow-up interviews, and/or more qualitative data-gathering tools to document changes in learners' awareness might also yield more interesting and valid data.

Overall this action research has made me much more aware of the importance of the richness of input, especially in listening activities, as a key factor in promoting acquisition of conversational pragmatic norms.

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## Appendix 1: Extracts form transcript and consciousness-raising questions

**Ken:** Giddy, Jeff. How are you?

**Jeff:** Oh, giddy Ken. I'm good. How are you?

**Ken:** Oh exhausted.

**Jeff:** Aha... been busy?

**Ken:** Really busy all these weekends .....

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**Jeff:** Ah – what have you been up to?

**Ken:** Looking for a house.

**Jeff:** What? To rent?

**Ken:** Ah I'm planning [to rent... ..]

**Jeff:** [Oh make some money .... huh?

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**Ken:** Well, pay off the mortgage really.

### Sample activities based on the text

#### Questions

1. How does the conversation start? Write the words of the first two speakers:
2. Is the small talk short or long? Is it long enough? What topics are part of the small talk?
3. What is the answer to Jeff's first small talk question? Is it positive or negative? Is this normal in NZ English? Is it polite in this conversation? Why?

#### Discussion

Did you notice any other differences in the language of conversation of the men compared to the women? Is this the same in your language and culture? (Look at feedback, length of sentences, greetings, questions.)

Do the men use humour or teasing? Where? Why? Do the women do this? Why? Why not? Is this the same in your language or culture?

#### Scaffolded practice (use of discourse markers)

*Student A* Ask an opening question about an interesting TV programme or movie your partner has seen lately.

*Student B* Answer

*Student A* Ask a follow-up question about the subject of the movie/TV programme. Use 'So' or 'And'.

#### Independent practice

Start a conversation with your partner. Make small talk, then change the subject and talk about something in the news. When the teacher signals, finish the conversation politely.

## Appendix 2: Pre- and Post- test criteria and scale

The learner can, according to core NZ English socio-cultural and pragmatic norms covered in the course:

Skill	To some extent	No
1. Start a conversation politely and appropriately	Address or greeting or response to greeting inappropriate	Both inappropriate OR one /both missing OR no response
2. Make culturally and pragmatically appropriate contribution to small talk	Too little small talk OR Inappropriate form OR Inappropriate topics	No small talk AND/OR Topic and form inappropriate
3. Use appropriate, polite questions to elicit information in body of conversation	Unnatural/inappropriate forms OR Little contribution	Very unnatural AND/OR Several unnatural/inappropriate questions OR No contribution
4. Avoid inappropriate topics	Topic of one question not appropriate	Topic of more than one question not appropriate.
5. Take the turn appropriately (ie initiate a turn when not given one)	Too quick or abrupt or little attempt where appropriate	Very abrupt or no attempt where appropriate
6. Give the turn appropriately.	Quite inappropriately dominant	Very inappropriately dominant
7. Give feedback politely and appropriately	Less or more feedback than appropriate OR Inappropriate feedback	No feedback or excessive amounts
8. Change the subject politely and appropriately (ie rounding off previous turn and/or using discourse markers)	Quite abrupt – timing right but rounding or discourse marker missing or inappropriate discourse marker	Very abrupt – timing inappropriate and no transition or rounding off of previous exchange
9. Finish the conversation politely and appropriately	Some pre-closure but not all, or some not appropriate	No pre-closure

**Key to Categories: Yes** – Does this without any pragmatic errors (ie there may be minor grammatical errors but the form and content is fully appropriate)

**To some extent** – Does this with one pragmatic error (see above)

**NO/NA** – No opportunity or not appropriate in the context of this conversation

### Appendix 3: Sample questions from the Self Assessment

Can you do these things according to the NZ culture in a conversation in New Zealand English? Tick the boxes:

	Yes	Sometimes	No
9. Change the subject politely and appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Finish the conversation politely and appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Appendix 4: Survey on perceived usefulness of activities (extract)

Did your knowledge of the culture of conversation in NZ English improve this term? Yes ☐ No ☐

If you ticked yes, please tick all the activities below that helped you to understand the culture and cultural language of conversation in NZ English. You can tick as many as you need to:

- ☐ listening to people outside the classroom
- ☐ talking to people outside the classroom
- ☐ information spoken in the classroom
- ☐ information written in worksheets
- ☐ group or class discussions
- ☐ practice in the classroom with a partner
- ☐ feedback or correction from the teacher during classroom practice with a partner
- ☐ listening to conversation tapes
- ☐ studying transcripts of conversations using worksheets
- ☐ other .....

Write here the **two** activities **from the list above** that **most helped** your improvement

1..... 2.....